

Expanding Feminist Art Strategies: The Beaded Treasures Project

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The Beaded Treasures Project is a socially engaged enterprise with a mission to promote women's agency in society. Its founder and director Surekha Kulkarni, who describes herself as a designer, strives "to promote positive social change by the feminist expression of art, and strongly believe(s) that when women and girls advance, so does society." The BTP does not aim to produce a single artwork or installation for a gallery or museum, instead it aims to engage participants in ongoing creative activities in which the interaction between the project and maker empowers the maker and constitutes the artistic project itself. Such socially motivated artist-, architect-, designer-run programs have gained increased visibility and currency in recent decades.¹ This case study reviews and characterizes the practices of the BTP and relates them to the art projects of three historically fundamental feminist artists working in the United States during the 1970s. The goals and strategies of the BTP, parallel those of the artists Ukeles, Schapiro and Chicago, because they mean to change perceptions of feminine labor and the economic worth of women's labor in society. Domestic work and household crafts, traditionally associated with women's work in the home, have played an important role in launching the feminist art movement (Molesworth). And as the success of BTP shows, feminist art practices prove to be transformative in the practical mission of the BTP, a social equity nonprofit today.

The Beaded Treasures Project was founded in 2011 in Louisville, Kentucky to help empower underprivileged women and refugees. Its stated mission is to teach jewelry making, re-purpose domestic expertise like sewing and cooking into marketable skills, and teach women to become entrepreneurs. The northernmost region of Kentucky – roughly between the cities of Louisville and Lexington, Kentucky, and Cincinnati, Ohio – is a significant area for international refugee resettlement in the United States (U.S. Department of State). Also called the "Golden Triangle," the region fuels the entire economy of Kentucky. BTP prepares its participants to benefit from this economy through the sale of hand-made products and services. The principles, goals and operational aspects of the BTP are typical of artisanal businesses worldwide (Alliance for Artisan Enterprise).² Similarly, the BTP is a non-profit organization, and sustains its operations with mixed sources of revenue. Some of its income derives from the sale of collaboratively produced

unique objects, mostly beaded jewelry, but to ensure survival it also seeks and accepts grants and donations.³ Artisanal jewelry, their chief product, is recognized in the field of craft business, and today more than a dozen U.S. journals are devoted to its support in design, distribution and merchandising.

BTP participants meet monthly to receive workshop instruction and produce their hand-made ware. Kulkarni provides supplies and tools at the workshop meeting, and teaches women how to use standard tools and materials, such as pliers, strings, wires, clasps and necklace molds. She teaches beading techniques and design, as well as what she calls “financial literacy.” Kulkarni herself learned artisanal beading in India, during a visit there many years after she and her family had settled in Louisville. In collaborative work sessions she stresses learning-by-doing supplemented by hands-on help and advice. In the workshop the women often share beading traditions with one another, but generally they invent novel patterns and designs. Depending on what was procured through purchases and donations the batches of beads do influence pattern options. The eventual design of the jewelry, whether a necklace, earrings or bracelet, is left up to the individual worker. In fact, the participant purchases the jewelry making supplies, including the beads on credit from the BTP. This loan is repaid to the BTP as finished pieces of jewelry are sold, and the maker retains the difference as earnings. In the process the value of woman’s creative labor is expressed in terms of monetary gain thus providing an element of “financial literacy.”

Since the end of 2016 a storefront gallery serves as a permanent shop for the exhibition and sale of jewelry, scarves, pillows, all items produced by the Beaded Treasures Project. Other kinds of spaces are used for the creative work itself, thanks to social service organizations in greater Louisville. These organizations include the Kentucky Refugee Ministries, Center for Women and Families, and Catholic Charities, all of which manage the resettlement of refugees in northern Kentucky. An important objective of these social service organizations as well as of the BTP, is to make possible connections among newcomers and residents, which in turn provides a means through which the women, in particular, can engage with local culture and the local economy. An organized group with a tangible project, the BTP has been fulfilling this purpose with success. The brick-and-mortar spaces of all these groups - their function rooms, libraries, and even hallways - become temporary studios and spaces for work and product display. Because they are not domestic spaces they provide a context of professionalism for the creative work of the women. By locating the making in a non-domestic setting, in this case a workshop or temporary studio, the BTP alleviates the „hobby” stigma from the domestic crafts, and transforms the creative activity into economically promising purposeful production. As philosopher Moira Gatens argues, labor must be removed from the

privacy of the home and become public production in order to activate the agency of the maker within the public sphere. The ability to act in society derives from a function of one's relation to the economic market, either as owner of a product or as the creator of a job (122, 127). In this case the BTP owns the job, while participants own the products. In fact, the BTP regards each participant, including a beginner, as an individual entrepreneur even though most of the labor is performed in a collaborative manner.⁴

When performed outside the home, woman's labor is seen to be of greater value, a phenomenon which became the subject of a significant feminist art project in 1973 when Mierle Laderman Ukeles performed the domestic labors of sweeping, dusting and washing within the institutional space of an art museum. In *Hartford Wash*, enacted at the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Ukeles's „work” became performance art. Predicated on precedents in the history of art, an artwork results when the maker is an artist or the context of the display indicates its essence as art.⁵ After Ukeles swept, dusted, cleaned, and mopped selected display cases and surfaces in the galleries, and some walkways outside the museum, they all became works of art. The artist's actions physically and conceptually transformed objects and spaces into a different, non-utilitarian category of things, because the performance was by an artist, and took place in the environment of the museum. Kulkarni's project relies on a similar kind of transposition: as participants string beads in a workshop setting, the value of their craft increases because the domestic skill transmutes into expertise with the potential for financial rewards.

The hierarchy of craft art as lesser than fine art has a long history in Western art. But in the early 1970s the fine art establishment, which routinely undervalued any art deemed decorative, craft-based, domestic, or collective, received a nationally reverberating challenge in *Womanhouse* (1971-1972), a major installation by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. Created at the California Institute of Arts (CalArts) in Valencia, *Womanhouse* incorporated all of those undervalued characteristics. To highlight the point about augmenting the value of art created at home, *Womanhouse* was even produced in a suburban home in Hollywood, California. First, the interior of the home was used for individual and collaborative studio spaces by women artists in the CalArts program, and then the rooms got morphed again, into gallery spaces for art display.

Women artists creating the installation *Womanhouse* employed a variety of craft techniques, such as crochet, appliqué, wall painting, and used non-functional ornaments for decorative effects. Outward signs of stereotypical femininity, such as wearing makeup, and enhancing the sexual character of the female body were also claimed for the toolbox of feminist practices. At the same time, *Womanhouse* reflected on the historic restriction of women's creativity to the domestic or sexual

spheres. In 1975, Judy Chicago explained the rationale of *Womanhouse* in her autobiography: “Women had been embedded in houses for centuries and had quilted, sewed, baked, cooked, decorated and nested their creative energies away. ... could the same activities women had used in life be transformed into the means of making art?” (Chicago 104) To respond *Womanhouse* stood as a demonstration of this likelihood because it elevated the stature of traditionally domestic crafts by transforming the place of creativity (a house) into a studio building of CalArts. It then reconceptualised the house as an art gallery of CalArts for the duration of the exhibition. However, lacking institutional support after the exhibition *Womanhouse* has not endured as a physical work of art, despite its public success and national television and magazine coverage. Nevertheless, *Womanhouse* became an indelible signpost for feminist art and American feminism because the women artists who created it used the cultural iconographies of traditional femininity as the medium of their creativity.

The significant feminist strategy at the heart of the *Womanhouse* project is also at the heart of the BTP. Beading is a craft, done with a needle and thread. Essentially sewing, beading relies on a skill set derived from domestic work, typically women’s work. Beaded body adornments are the oldest type of artifacts retrieved from archaeological digs, and as jewelry, perform a signifying function of gender and social identity. In Western cultures adult women wear the most jewelry, and jewelry is typically linked to their sexual identity.⁶ With or without awareness of these historical and cultural associations, the BTP changes the role of jewelry from a mark of objectification to an object of empowerment. The BTP reorients the received meanings of beaded jewelry, just as *Womanhouse* repositioned meanings of makeup and needlework, by turning beading and jewelry making into a professional activity.

Kulkarni’s Louisville project offers a fresh context for the woman crafter, one that does not suppress traditional skills and creativity, but rewards with public recognition and the potential for economic gain. Success spurs some BTP participants to plan similar projects. Indeed, since 2014 the BTP itself has expanded with additional craft-based initiatives that continue to rely on existing skills. Now “Threaded Treasures” offers sewing and alteration services, and “Gourmet Treasures” features sweets and snacks for sale, made by refugee women (Kulkarni). BTP projects promote social equalization enabled by the communal experiences. The BTP is achieving its social goal by providing opportunities to create new frames of reference for its participants’ lived experience. Specifically, BTP experiences enable women to gain self-confidence in design abilities and crafting skills, and ascend into the community of local artists (Kentucky Foundation for Women). They improve their self-image, practice marketing skills and acquire fi-

nancial knowledge. Kulkarni assigns special importance to teaching how to cost materials, calculating added value through labor and design, and becoming proficient with the business aspects of the enterprise, such as purchasing supplies, and finding buyers for the finished products.

As a mostly self-supporting, but partially grant-funded project, the BTP has a non-profit business model. The *Beaded Treasures Project* periodically receives support from the Kentucky Foundation for Women, which promotes feminism and social justice, and from other community partners as well.⁷ This kind of funding model is embraced by the artisan sector worldwide. The Aspen Institute, an umbrella organization hosting the Alliance for Artisan Enterprise since 2012 was launched to connect craft-based projects around the world, and to support their potential to improve earning opportunities for the crafters. In the effort to sustain domestic crafts in Appalachia, artisanal businesses organized like the BTP share a history of significant precedents set in early twentieth-century America.⁸ Essential for the artisanal model is the structural dependency between the amateur producer and the professional manager (or managerial entity), who work in tandem to propel the economic cycle, as the BTP does.

Judy Chicago adopted this model during the making of the large installation called *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979), now at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York. Started just two years after *Womanhouse* was concluded, *The Dinner Party* consists of ceramic and textile elements configured into an equilateral triangle. The perimeter structure is the table set for the feast, so that each seated guest would gaze over the triangular void in the center. A white triangular floor made up of hundreds of individual porcelain tiles supports the three table wings and pulls all into a cohesive unit. Thirty-nine table settings (13 on each side) bear the names of prominent women in Western civilization from every discipline. They are hand-stitched onto individual fabric runners which overhang the table surfaces. Goblets, eating utensils, and sculpted ceramic plates are centered on each runner and feature imagery in the women's honor. In addition, 999 names of women, whose historical contributions have yet to be fully appreciated, are written in gold onto the tiles of the white porcelain floor.

The Dinner Party is highly complex, its ostensible content based on written documents about the women and on the material legacy of women's creativity in all media - from needlecrafts to literature, from pottery to social action and beyond. Among those included, only one person was living at the time, the American artist Georgia O'Keefe. With its many elements, the installation took five years to complete. Artists and crafters were employed to make the sculpted plates and goblets, paint the ceramic surfaces, sew and embroider the runners and perform specific tasks according to Chicago's designs and directions. Chicago headed the work-

shops, steered production and oversaw all aspects of the multi-disciplinary project. Four years into the project, and still without institutional support, Chicago incorporated as a 501(c)3 non-profit to be able to raise sufficient funds for completion. With the organizational name “Through the Flower,” adopted from the title of her 1975 autobiography, Chicago re-classified *The Dinner Party* as a distinct project of the non-profit. Chicago’s workshop model and eventual non-profit status prefigured the structure of most artisan enterprises today. It also foreshadowed the common framework of socially engaged projects such as the *Beaded Treasures Project* itself.

The Idea that, domestic work can assume the stature of artistic creativity was pioneered by the projects of Ukeles, Chicago and Shapiro, and reiterated by Helen Molesworth in her article “House Work and Art Work.” The artists’ principal strategy was to bring awareness to art by women, through public display and by inserting traditional crafting practices within the fine art context. The BTP achieves its goals in a similar manner: it brings value to women’s creativity by promoting existing domestic skills into their entrepreneurial toolbox. The use of craft practices by the BTP reprises the goals of crafting in feminist art. In each situation the repurposing of craft and crafting intends to elevate the social and economic stature of the maker. During the 1970s feminist artists used craft to claim a new position for art by women, and thirty years on, the BTP turns to craft to fashion a new position for women. While feminist goals in art have not yet been met, feminist art strategies do sustain socially empowering projects, as the *Beaded Treasures Project* so abundantly demonstrates.

NOTES

¹ Social practice art, also known as Socially Engaged Art (SEA), has gained currency in the United States as a new kind of art practice since the 1990s. At its core the artist addresses a socially relevant issue using methods and media which may be borrowed from the social sciences. Well-known projects have been ambitious, like *Project Row Houses* run by Rick Lowe in Houston (1993-) or the lead pollution project of Mel Chin (2007-2014). Tania Bruguera’s social practice project called *Immigrant Movement International* (2010-2014) was sponsored by the Queens Museum of New York, whose director, Tom Finkelpearl, describes SEA as specifically programmed social interaction which itself is, at some level, the art. Pablo Helguera, director of the education department at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York has codified the practice in his manual, [Education for](#)

Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook published in 2011.

¹ Artisanal enterprises exist worldwide, and function to channel income to practitioners of local crafts by integrating artisan producers in need of economic opportunity into the stream of global commerce, mostly with the aid of public-private support organizations and foundations.

¹ Several SEA projects are incorporated as 501(c)3 corporations as an economic survival strategy (enables the tax-deductibility of donations which benefit the benefactor), including *Project Row Houses* run by Rick Lowe in Houston, Theaster Gates' *Rebuild Foundation* in Chicago, while Bruguera's project *Immigrant Movement International* was sponsored by the Queens Museum, itself a non-profit entity.

¹ Microcredit originated in the developing world, and is the lending of very small amounts of money typically to individuals with earning potential through personal enterprise, but without a job or credit history.

¹ An early and well-known instance of conceptual practice is Marcel Duchamp's *Untitled (Urinal)* from 1917. Duchamp had altered a mass-produced, utilitarian object by placing it upside down on a pedestal, by painting on a signature and a date, and by submitting it to a gallery for exhibition with paintings and sculptures in New York.

¹ Since the Middle Paleolithic period, beads play a variety of functions, in courtship, as amulets, to beautify the body, to mark individual or group identity, signify class, wealth, social status, gender. The shell-bead finds are from Blombos, South Africa and are dated 75,000 years old. They are recognized as the earliest indication of "cultural modernity" among anatomically modern humans. (see Henshilwood)

¹ Community partners include the Kentucky foundation for Women, Kentucky Refugee Ministries, Catholic charities, Just Creations, Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest, Volunteers of America Mid-States, Louisville Free Public Library, World Affairs Council of Kentucky and Southern Indiana. Substantial donors include the Law Firm of Borders and Borders, and the Accounting Firm Goforth and Herron, both in Louisville, KY.

¹ In the Southern Highlands of the Appalachian region, the socially committed impulse to elevate the economic standing of non-professionals, predominantly women, had begun with the revival of rural craft production early in the 20th century. Frances Louisa Goodrich had organized Allandstand Cottage Industries, and marketed Appalachian craft to the nation, mostly through a shop in Asheville,

NC. Goodrich encouraged surplus craft production in the home, which fostered the survival and practice of local craft knowledge. Goodrich also succeeded in setting up a system to sustain regional craft production and its marketing, which was institutionalized by the Southern Highland Handicrafts Guild established in 1930 (Adamson 2007: 112).

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